

## **2.0 SUMMARY OF EXISTING CONDITIONS**

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### **2.1 Context of the Specific Plan**

Figure 4 illustrates the University Avenue Specific Plan Area and its surrounding context. University Avenue is a four-lane thoroughfare linking Downtown Riverside and the Riverside campus of the University of California (UCR), a distance of two miles. The Avenue has excellent freeway access from Interstate 215 and the Riverside Freeway (State Highway 91). University Avenue and its adjoining properties are part of the Central Industrial Project Area. Between the study area and Downtown is the Riverside Marketplace, a Redevelopment Agency project planned to become a pedestrian intensive mix of restaurants, offices, retail, industrial and residential uses having an historic ambiance.

The UCR campus, at the east end of the University Avenue corridor is divided by the I-215 freeway into two areas of approximately 550 acres each. The western portion of UCR's campus is currently used for experimental agricultural uses including avocado and citrus groves, and borders the Central Industrial Redevelopment Area on the south. East of I-215 is the academic core of the campus. University Avenue terminates at the edge of this part of the campus, and serves as its main visitor and ceremonial entrance.

North and south of University Avenue is the long established Eastside community, generally bounded by Third Street on the north, Chicago Avenue on the east, the Tequesquite Arroyo on the south and the Riverside Freeway on the west. The Eastside community is an ethnically diverse community of single-family development and apartments and with a higher percentage of minority population than the City as a whole. The Eastside Community Plan establishes planning policy for this area.

The eastern portion of University Avenue corridor is part of the University Community Plan area which contains all of UCR and is bounded on the north and east by the City limits, on the south by Central Avenue and on the west by Ottawa and Kansas Avenues. This area connects UCR with a mixture of residential housing types from hillside housing to apartments and Box Springs Mountain Regional Park.

### **2.2 Existing Land Use and Character of Development**

Existing land uses located along University Avenue are varied, but consist primarily of fast food and full service restaurants, banks, highway-oriented hotels, motels, gasoline stations

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Figure 4 - Site Context

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and auto repair uses. Commercial uses front most of University Avenue, and are generally backed by residential uses. Concentrated close to the UCR and I-215 are newer and larger commercial developments. Older structures and poorer building conditions are generally found in the western portion of the corridor.

A parcel-by-parcel land use survey was performed along University Avenue between Park Avenue and Interstate-215. The results of the survey have been assembled as a Land Use Inventory matrix which is attached to this document as Appendix A. A photographic survey of existing development along this portion of University Avenue is also a part of this study and has been assembled as a separate package. Table 1 indicates the number of each existing land use along University Avenue. Figure 5 summarizes the existing land uses east and west of Chicago Avenue along University Avenue.

In general, the University Avenue study area is in an excellent location and has the potential to be a vital and economically strong part of Riverside's urban fabric. In addition to being located in the fastest-growing area of the state, University Avenue enjoys excellent freeway access, proximity to a major campus of the University of California and it is within reasonable range of households with higher than average incomes. Unfortunately, University Avenue is characterized by a number of physical and social problems which hamper its ability to achieve its potential (Figure 6). These include:

- ! Uneven, poor quality development in a strip commercial pattern;
- ! A generally poor visual character, with no continuity in the quality or design of architecture or landscaping;
- ! The sense of being traffic-dominated with minimal pedestrian amenities;
- ! A predominance of narrow, shallow commercial parcels (primarily between Park and Chicago Avenues);
- ! Large, underutilized commercial sites (in the vicinity of Chicago Avenue); and
- ! Concentrations of uses, especially liquor stores and certain motels which give the Avenue a poor image and are magnets for such law enforcement problems as prostitution and drug trafficking.

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**Table 1**  
**SUMMARY TOTAL OF EXISTING UNIVERSITY AVENUE LAND USES**  
**BETWEEN PARK AVENUE AND I-215**

!	Restaurant	28
!	Auto Service	23
!	Retail Commercial	27
!	Office	27
!	Vacant	17
!	Motel	16
!	Fast-Food/Drive Through	11
!	Single-Family Residential	9
!	Parking	6
!	Multi-Family Residential	2
!	Shopping Center	2
!	Institutional	4
!	Warehouse (storage)	1
!	Park/Sports Complex	1

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Figure 5 - Land Use Inventory Summary; Park Avenue to I-215

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Figure 6 - Existing Conditions

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The character of development is conspicuously lacking in continuity or a positive visual quality presumably as a result of the following development and design approaches:

- ! **Discontinuity and Absence of a Pedestrian-Scaled Streetscape.** The existing palm trees (*Washingtonia robusta* and *Washingtonia filifera*) all along University Avenue and the mature deciduous trees near Bobby Bonds Park are among the Avenue's most positive assets, providing a strong, visual unity to the street edge as seen from a distance. Missing street trees in some areas plus a general lack of consistent parkway landscaping and maintenance in many areas diminishes the value of these majestic trees.

Severe traffic and pedestrian conflicts are caused by numerous curb cuts serving the large numbers of small parcels fronting University Avenue. These multiple curb cuts also disrupt the rhythm of the street edge by limiting potential street tree locations and interrupting the continuity of the sidewalk.

- ! **Minimal Landscaping of Development.** The City's Design Review Board has made significant improvements to the quality of newer development, including higher quality landscaping, better parking lot shading and screening and higher quality building design. Three factors have limited the Design Review Board's impact, however:

- A lack of strong and coordinated development standards has tended to produce results that are individually successful, but which do not contribute to any sense of design coordination or cohesiveness.
- Most development along University Avenue predates the advent of Design Review.
- Poor property maintenance has allowed even some of the newer developments to deteriorate significantly. Because the City does not have definitive property maintenance laws, there has been little the City could do to prevent this from happening.

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- ! **Vacant Land.** A substantial number of vacant parcels interrupt the continuity of the Avenue, compromising any sense of place or street edge. The vacant parcels also visually extend the horizontal plane of University Avenue far beyond the actual right-of-way.
- ! **Parking Lots Adjacent to the Street.** The placement of parking adjacent to the street right-of-way blurs any sense of street edge or containment.
- ! **Poor Signage and Billboard Advertising.** The City's sign code was completely rewritten in 1987 to essentially ban pylon signs for all but larger commercial developments and certain freeway oriented gasoline stations. Unfortunately, most of the signage along University Avenue was constructed prior this sign code rewrite. Consequently, a significant aspect of University Avenue's visual blight is caused by large numbers of freestanding pylon signs serving the Avenue's multitude of small parcels. While billboards are still allowed in the current sign code, all of the billboards constructed along University Avenue were built long before the current code or the Design Review process. These billboards significantly detract from the Avenue's visual image.
- ! **No Unique Character.** While University Avenue is very typical of strip commercial streets in Southern California, it has the potential to be something much more special. Some communities have significantly upgraded the appearance of such strip commercial streets with such things as unique lighting standards and street furniture, textural paving materials, unique bus stops, outdoor eating areas with colorful umbrellas, art viewing areas and/or commonality of signage.

### 2.3 Overall Character of the Specific Plan Area by Subdistrict

In the course of conducting this study, it became apparent that University Avenue naturally falls into several readily identifiable subdistricts, each with its own unique character as reflected in such qualities as parcel and building size, land use mix, architecture and typical densities. While there are a number of problems associated with each of these subdistricts, they also have many qualities worth preserving and enhancing. Consequently, these subdistricts have not only formed a basis for studying and analyzing University Avenue, but they are also the basis for many of the planning concepts recommended in this specific plan. Figure 7 illustrates these subdistricts. The following analysis of land uses, as well as the balance of this specific plan, are organized in accordance with these identifiable subdistricts.



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Figure 7 Subdistricts

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**2.3.1 Existing Land Use and Character: Subdistrict 1 (Small Business Opportunity Area)**

Along University Avenue from Park Avenue to just west of Chicago Avenue, the commercially planned and zoned area is a narrow strip one lot deep. Each block typically consists of lots which are 50-60 feet wide and less than 145 feet deep with multiple curb cuts to University Avenue. There are very few owners who own multiple lots. Most of the land north and south of this commercial strip consists of single-family and multi-family homes of the Eastside community. Between Franklin and Eucalyptus Avenues to the north of University Avenue is the Longfellow Elementary School playground.

Bobby Bonds Park fronts on University Avenue between Kansas and Douglass Avenues and is the site of the former University Heights Junior High School, now being used as the Riverside Community Center. This building has been designated as a Cultural Heritage Board landmark and is an excellent example of Spanish Renaissance architecture. Seventh Street, which is directly behind University Avenue, is fronted by architecturally interesting homes which are part of a Cultural Heritage Landmark District.

The frontage along this segment of University Avenue is characterized by small businesses, primarily in older commercial structures or renovated residences. Auto uses are predominant and 15 percent of the lots or structures are vacant.

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In general, land uses in Subdistrict 1 are as follows:

-	Auto Service		16
-	Retail Commercial		15
-	Vacant	15	
-	Restaurant		14
-	Office		13
-	Single-Family Residential		9
-	Motel		7
-	Fast-Food/Drive Through		4
-	Parking		3
-	Multi-Family Residential		2
-	Institutional		1
-	Warehouse (storage)	1	
-	Park/Sports Complex	1	
-	Shopping Center		1

Structures in the area are generally smaller in size than those in the rest of the area and are typically one story in height. Most of the structures are older buildings, and many are in need of repair. In several areas, older two-story homes remain, which are vacant or used as offices. Signage in the area tends to be cluttered, billboards are conspicuous, and unscreened parking lots and storage are visible from the street. The most positive images are the tall mature trees adjacent to the curb in planting strips, mostly in older areas between Douglass and Sedgewick Avenues, and the row of palms east of Douglass Avenue.

In accordance with current City policy, newer sidewalks tend to be located immediately adjacent to the street. The lack of a parkway produces a hard edge and is intimidating for pedestrians. In the older areas, most sidewalks tend to be protected from the street by a parkway, but many of these areas have extensive curb breaks.

### **2.3.2 Existing Land Use and Character: Subdistrict 2 (Community Shopping Center Area)**

Subdistrict 2 consists of frontage along University Avenue containing a motel, a fast food restaurant, and two underutilized community commercial shopping centers on both sides of Chicago Avenue:

- ! An 8-acre, 91,000-square-foot community shopping center is located on the east side of Chicago Avenue. At the writing of this report the 60,000 square foot anchor store was vacant, however, plans were under way for the occupancy of this space with a warehouse grocery store.
- ! On the west side of Chicago Avenue is the Town Center Shopping Center, which is over 30 years old. Its buildings are located in the middle of a an approximately 18 acre site with large, underutilized parking areas on all sides. An ethnically oriented supermarket, drug store and bowling alley are the major anchors. There is an absence of landscaping in the parking areas, outdated cluttered signage and no strong architectural image.

### **2.3.3 Existing Land Use and Character: Subdistrict 3 (Visitor Commercial Area and University-Related Use Area)**

Subdistrict 3 consists of large structures on larger parcels, many of which are underutilized. Frontages generally vary from 125 to 250 feet. Newer structures are interspersed among the older structures. Concentrated close to the UCR and I-215 are the newer and larger developments, including the Days Inn Hotel and the Hampton Inn, and the older Holiday Inn. Also in this subdistrict are restaurants, office uses, banks, and service stations. Adjacent to the Days Inn Hotel is the Weber House, a City of Riverside Cultural Heritage Landmark, and an example of craftsman period architecture. UCR has been expanding into this area through acquisitions. It has converted the former Park Inn into Highlander Hall, and it may acquire the Holiday Inn sometime in the future.

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The number of each land use in Subdistrict 3 is as follows:

-	Office	14
-	Retail Commercial	12
-	Restaurant	11
-	Motel	7
-	Fast Food/Drive Through	6
-	Auto Service	5
-	Parking/Driveway Access	3
-	Vacant	2
-	Institutional	2
-	Shopping Center	1

Properties in this Subdistrict generally have more landscaping, particularly in the newer developments, better signage control and less billboard advertising than Subdistrict 1. There is, however, substantial room for improvement.

As in other portions of University Avenue, there is no consistency in the relationship between buildings, parking and the adjacent street right-of-way. Parking lots often have little or no landscaping and are either located in the front, on the side, or in the rear of buildings.

From just west of Chicago Avenue to Iowa Avenue, University Avenue is primarily four lanes wide with an even wider section in front of the Days Inn, dedicated in anticipation of a six-lane configuration. It is also the area of the most prominent existing palm street tree plantings. From Iowa Avenue to I-215, the street has been widened to a six-lane cross section, and the existing rights-of-way are 120 feet.

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The area has a wide concrete sidewalk with tree wells for palm trees. This segment is planned to be the ceremonial entrance to UCR. However, the freeway overpass and the multiple ramps to the freeway make pedestrian access difficult and unfriendly to the UCR populace who want to use University Avenue.

### **2.3.4 Existing Land Use and Character: Subdistrict 4 (Mixed-Use Development Area)**

Subdistrict 4a is an approximately 16-acre triangular site situated east of Iowa Avenue and occupied by three gas stations (one vacant) and five restaurants, a larger vacant structure (formerly used for auto sales) and the Howard Johnson's Motel, bounded by University Avenue, Iowa Avenue, and Interstate 215. Eighty-five percent of the site is in two ownerships, and a large portion is vacant, providing a unique, one-of-a-kind opportunity for developing the entire site as one master planned project.

Here, the University Avenue pavement is wide, the width of six lanes of traffic, and University Avenue has a wide concrete sidewalk with palm trees in tree wells. There are multiple curb breaks on both University and Iowa Avenues. Frontage along University Avenue for each parcel varies from 150 feet to over 200 feet and setbacks of the buildings from the University Avenue curb varies from 15 to 99 feet.

Subdistrict 4b is an approximately 12-acre vacant site on the west side of Iowa Avenue which is at a key location in relation to UCR. The site is encumbered by a municipal drainage channel, University Wash, at its northeast corner. A 65 foot-wide easement has been designated on the site, which would have to be protected from encroachment from proposed buildings and other permanent structures other than parking lots and landscaping.